

The Nature of Negotiated Vocabulary Items

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ABSTRACT

When participating in meaning-focused activities like discussions, inevitably interlocutors will encounter problematic L2 vocabulary items in attempting to convey messages. As Japanese learners of English share the same L1, amongst other strategies, they may use this technique to negotiate meaning and ease the cognitive and social burden of an activity. However, this strategy remains controversial. This preliminary study will present an analysis of an audio-recorded data sample chosen from recordings made throughout the semester. The aim was to determine the nature of vocabulary items Japanese learners of English negotiate with one another aided by their first language. The sample of negotiated vocabulary items will be compared to the New General Service List (NGSL) and the New Academic Word List (NAWL) – recently revised lists of high frequency words deemed essential for second language learners of English, to explore which items may be suitable for future instruction by fellow instructors.

INTRODUCTION

According to Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), a widespread use of the communicative language teaching approach has led to an L1 inclusion in classroom activities being discouraged and often considered controversial. This is in part due to the plethora of learning and teaching activities and techniques available for maximizing L2 and target language use. However, regarding the area of vocabulary focus, an inclusion of the learners' L1 may have a crucial and altogether pivotal part to play. This is supported by Laufer (2005) who argues that learners "unconsciously translate anyway" (p.4), while pointing to research that shows L1 glosses to be largely beneficial. While Cook (1999) believes that L2 learners of English are multicompetent language users, with the ability to make L1 and L2 coexist collaboratively. A study by Anton and DiCamilla (1998) also revealed that L1 use in L2 activities provided three useful functions: to provide scaffolding help, to establish a shared perspective on a task, and to externalize learners' inner speech. It would therefore appear that L1 use in L2 development holds a paradoxical position within prevalent teaching paradigms.

Nation (2003) describes a balanced language course as one that consists of four equal parts: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. Nation's four strands describe how L2 use and learning can be maximized, however Nation believes that L1 can still have a significant role to play within this approach. The writer's program, an English discussion course, does not reflect Nation's description of a balanced course, owing to the lack of language focused learning, particularly vocabulary input, favoring instead an emphasis on fluency development and meaning focused input and output. As a result, L1 use may find its way into activities such as discussions and preparation tasks. Regarding similar activities, Nation argues that L1 use helps learners "come to grips with ideas," "gain control of relevant L2 vocabulary," as well as to "gain the knowledge needed to reach a higher level" (p.3). Swain (2000) hypothesizes that "learners seek solutions to their linguistic difficulties when the social activity they are engaged in offers them an incentive to do so and the means to do so" (p.100). In the case of Japanese learners in an English discussion, L1 use may play a social role, in that learners can collaborate with one another to overcome vocabulary difficulty, while saving face and maintaining interaction. Interactions of this nature are what could be described as language-related episodes (LRE), which are any part of a dialogue where language learners "talk about the language they are

producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (Swain and Lapkin, 1998, p.326). Particular to this study, LREs are occasions when items of vocabulary are in need of address, either productively as a speaker, or receptively as a listener. This corresponds to Swain and Lapkin’s (2000) second coding category of ‘focusing attention,’ involving vocabulary searching and focusing on form.

On the writer’s English discussion program, fellow instructors have handled vocabulary negotiation in a variety of ways. Activities by Kambe (2015) and Smith (2015) both offered additional L2 support of potentially problematic vocabulary items. Kambe chose to incrementally stage the instruction of vocabulary items for lower-level students, while Smith measured the effects in quality of output between an experimental and control group, one receiving targeted vocabulary instruction, the other without. In a reflective study by Ouellete (2014), Ouellete established that L1 was a characteristic of pair and group activities in both conveying meaning and understanding in English. Ouellette took steps to introduce scaffolding techniques as an alternative to L1 in LREs. On the other hand, others have been supportive of L1 use, using it as a way to highlight and pinpoint areas of unknown vocabulary that may be fit for instruction. For example, Lowe (2014) set about selecting appropriate vocabulary to be taught in a supplementary manner by first observing emerging needs during the pre-task stage before supplying a limited set of vocabulary items that could be used in the discussion task that followed. Lowe’s criteria for selecting appropriate vocabulary were that any items selected must be emergent as a result of learners’ needs, high in frequency, and dependent of the lesson context.

Lowe’s activity appraises the importance of L1 use in the classroom as a way to point towards the emerging vocabulary needs of learners, while the other approaches pre-empt potential vocabulary problems. This raises questions about how vocabulary learners desire or lack in the moment should be observed and addressed. Laufer (2015) claims that learners may lack the level of vocabulary production and reception skills needed to simply interact at a comfortable level in oral activities. This surely means that a greater attention should be placed upon the items of vocabulary that learners are negotiating as an area of analysis that could help inform syllabus designers and instructors alike. Such LREs consisting of L1 use when negotiating unknown items of vocabulary provide snapshot moments that reveal areas of language learners lack during meaning-focused tasks, or ‘holes’ in their interlanguage (Swain, 2000, p.100). It may be useful to consider the characteristics of these instances as a way to inform both future learner language development and course development respectively. In order to do so, such vocabulary items need to be measured in order to test suitability and usefulness.

METHOD

Design and Data Collection

Audio recordings were carried out in all of the participants’ classes from lesson two to lesson thirteen of their first semester of study on the program in 2015. Recordings were taken at two stages in each lesson, with the first during an initial ten-minute discussion, and the second during an extended sixteen-minute discussion. For this study, recordings from lesson six will be detailed here, as this sample is most representative of the entire data collection. Discussions in lesson six were specific to the topic of technology in the past, present and future. Due to practical considerations regarding the class, some discussion recordings were occasionally curtailed. The amount of participants present for each recording was not taken into account as this was beyond the writer’s control.

The recordings were examined for how learners negotiated content words in particular, for example nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Occasions where learners translated entire

clauses and phrasal verbs were discounted, as too were instances where learners used L1 to refer to task planning. LREs containing inaudible interaction were also disqualified.

To present a profile of negotiated vocabulary items, The New General Service List (NGSL) was used for this study. Browne, Culligan and Phillips' (2013) list is an update of the original devised by West's (1953) – The General Service List (GSL). Sixty years on from the original's publication, the new list draws upon a "273-million-word subsection of the 1.6- billion-word Cambridge English Corpus (CEC)" (Browne, 2013, p.13), with the purpose similar to that of the original list in that "high-frequency words that were deemed important for second language learners" (Browne, 2014, p.35) are brought together. This list is also supplemented with the New Academic Word List (NAWL), similarly updated to give coverage of commonly used academic words. Brezina and Gablasova (2013) also produced their own reworking of West's GSL, however this study refers solely to Browne, Culligan and Phillips' version.

Although vocabulary items negotiated in English discussions are a result of the learners own emerging needs at the time, comparing these items with lists like the NGSL may help to give instructors and course developers alike a better sense of understanding and direction as to what vocabulary items may be useful for future instruction and focus by using the learners' needs as a starting point.

Aim and Research Questions

This study looks exclusively at instances of LREs where L1 was used as a way to negotiate unknown L2 vocabulary in English discussion tasks specifically. The aim of this study is to establish the nature of the vocabulary that learners ask for help with in topic-specific discussion activities, as well to explore which items can be successfully produced or not during the task. The recorded items will then be compared to the NGSL as a way to add support to the potential future instruction and inclusion of such negotiated vocabulary items. This study will address the following three research questions:

- What items of vocabulary do learners negotiate in a topic-specific discussion?
- To what extent were negotiated vocabulary items accurately produced at the time?
- How prominent are the negotiated vocabulary items on the NGSL?

The writer is concerned with collecting instances where the learners made use of their L1 to find out an English word, or support others in the understanding of a language item. In the initial classes of the program, learners were explicitly instructed to ask for help if they encountered a difficult item of vocabulary. Ideally, learners would ask one another: 'how do you say ___?' However, learners often say a word in Japanese with an inflection, signaling that they wish to receive help. Speakers were also encouraged to help the learners listening who didn't understand something; this often resulted in learners offering a Japanese translation. The data presented here are limited to these L1 strategies of vocabulary negotiation alone.

Participants

There are four levels of learner on the writer's course: Level I being the most proficient, and IV being the least. The writer's Level III learners were decided for use for this study, owing to the fact that this level makes up the highest percentage of learners on the program, and would therefore provide a richer sample of data. Before entering the program and independent of this particular study, learners took a TOEIC test to determine their level; with Level III falling between a combined listening and reading score of 280-479. According to ETS' published list of can-do

guidelines related to TOEIC scores (ETS, n.d.), learners falling into this score band have the ability handle various tasks comfortably both productively and receptively, but they may struggle in scenarios where lower frequency vocabulary is required. Six groups ranging between seven to nine learners gave their consent to take part in this study before commencement. All in all, there were 47 participants.

Data Analysis

Each recording was listened to initially twice, once by the writer, and then together with a Japanese-speaking assistant. Once the recordings had been initially listened to, with an appropriate Japanese L1 item established and the unknown English item agreed upon, the items were collated alphabetically onto a table (Appendix). In response to the second research question, the writer of this study listened a further time to the recordings to establish if a successful negotiation was made, this can also be found on the same table. Finally, the same table also contains the frequency of each language item based on the NGSL and NAWL. *Vocabprofile* (Cobb, n.d.) was used to analyze the list of vocabulary items and arrange them into the following frequency bands as follows:

NGSL1: The first 1000 frequently used words

NGSL2: The second 1000 frequently used words

NGSL3: The third 801 frequently used words

NAWL: The top 963 frequently used words in academic works

OFF: Words that aren't included on the above lists

RESULTS

This section will address each of the three research questions, followed by a discussion.

Research Question 1

Having eliminated any negotiated vocabulary beyond the limitations of this study, the total amount of vocabulary items remaining were 66 (see appendix). The following chart provides a breakdown of total number of nouns, verbs, and adjectives for the 66 negotiated vocabulary items in week six:

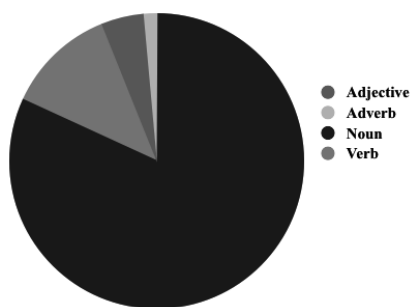


Figure 1. Total percentage of word types

As the figure makes clear, the highest proportion of vocabulary items that the learners requested or offered support to each other with were nouns, with 12% being verbs, 5% adjectives, and just 2% being adverbs. The discussion section that follows this results section will explore the nature of these vocabulary items in more detail.

Research Question 2

The second research question endeavored to examine to what extent learners successfully could negotiate an item of vocabulary in English. Once again, this study was concerned with how the learners could replicate an equivalent dictionary definition of the L1 word used, not on how well other communicative skills were deployed as a way to overcome unknown or problematic vocabulary. The following figure compares the amount of successfully negotiated words with items of vocabulary that weren't produced by participants during the discussions:

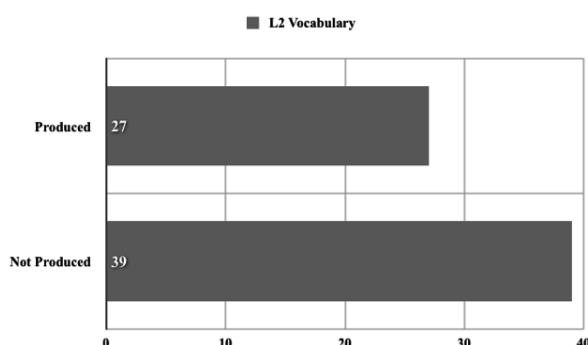


Figure 2. Amount of produced L2 vocabulary items

As the figure shows, there was no significant gap between the amount of items that the participants could collectively produce or not.

Research Question 3

As was explained in the methods section of this study, the NGSL/NAWL was used to analyze the frequency of the gathered list of negotiated vocabulary items. The frequency of the vocabulary items was assessed using the online *Vocabprofile* tool. Function words such as 'and' and 'of' were excluded when testing the vocabulary items, as were repeated words such as 'development.' Where vocabulary items contained more than one word, like 'modern day,' these were recorded as separate items.

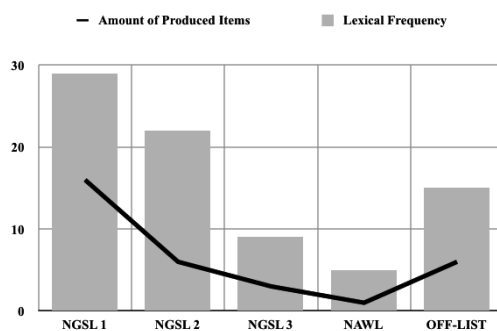


Figure 3. Amount of word in each frequency level and amount of produced items

The highest proportion of vocabulary items that the participants negotiated were NGSL 1 words; the most frequently informed by the corpus that the list is based upon. Of the 29 individual

words, learners were successfully able to negotiate 16 items or 55.2%. This was followed by NGSL 2 words, which totaled 22 vocabulary items. Learners could negotiate a significantly lower amount of these, just 6, or 27.3%. There were nine NGSL 3 items, of which learners could successfully negotiate 33.3%. Surprisingly, there were a total of 15 Off-list words; items of vocabulary that aren't used frequently enough to make the first three lists. Of these items, participants could work out 40% of the English equivalents of the Japanese words asked for.

DISCUSSION

Research question one found that this study's participants predominantly asked for nouns more than any other content word. The majority of nouns were highly specific to the topic of technology, for example: *floor heating*, *microwave oven*, *radio clock*, *refrigerator*, *surgery*, and *transportation*. The word *refrigerator* was a particularly interesting item, as it was the only word in the sample of data to be negotiated more than once. The learners also negotiated difficult concepts such as: *wind power*, *geothermal power*, *food famine*, and the *earth's lifespan*, illustrating that the learners' discussions considered wider applications of technology. A proportion of nouns that the learners negotiated can also be viewed as more personal in nature: *relationship*, *attitude*, *close friend* and *real intention*.

When reflecting on the high percentage of nouns, it became clear that although the learners asked one another for a noun, in the context of the discussion, they actually required a different word type instead, as was the case with the following examples:

S1: If we can know everyone's thinking, we how do you say *konran*?

S2: *konran*? Dispute? Problem? Con...Confuse Confuse.

S1: Confuse, we must be confused.

The learner here required an adjective to convey her message, however she asked the other students in the group for the noun form of the word – *konran*/混乱, meaning 'confusion'. Some other learners alternated between noun and adjective forms in English, but still ultimately used the Japanese noun form – *fukuzatsu*/複雑 to convey the adjective meaning 'complicated' in English:

S1: So space cities not good but not bad.

S2: Oh yeah complexity is *fukuzatsu* how do you say *fukuzatsu*?

S1: Com..com

S2: Complicated.

These two examples show that learners have the ability to produce both nouns and adjectives in English, but will usually turn to the noun form in Japanese when asking for support in negotiating vocabulary.

As the topic of the discussion was reflecting on the development of technology from the past to the present and into the future, a lot of the verbs that the learners required support with reflected this: *spread*, *increase*, *maintain*, *exist*, and *emerge*. However again, often when learners required a verb to explain a point, they referred to the L1 noun form:

S1: Another reason is if there is time machine, we can know future's things.

S2: Can you give me an example?

S1: For example, earthquake.

S3: Ahh, me too, me too. Tsunami tsunami.

S1: It is *yobou*

S3: ok

S2: Expect the earthquake and protect our lives

The word used here was *yobou*/予防, meaning prevention in English. However, we can infer from the interaction that the word ‘prevent’ would be more adequate. So overall, we can tell from this sample of results that learners readily negotiated the noun form of words in their Japanese L1 in the multiple occasions where a different form was required.

The second research question explored to what extent learners could successfully produce the English equivalents of Japanese vocabulary items during discussions. As was shown in Figure 2, an interesting point to note is that the amount of vocabulary items that the learners weren’t able to produce was a greater amount than that of the vocabulary items that learners were able to produce and use during their discussions. An investigative study by Moir and Nation (2008) may add support to these findings. Their study revealed that learners often have “an inflated idea of their vocabulary size, and instead of working a little more on higher frequency words, learners tended to focus on those that were completely unknown” (p.169). This may explain why learners asked for items of vocabulary that were beyond the vocabulary knowledge of their fellow classmates. For example, vocabulary items such as ‘geothermal power’ and ‘emerge’ were unsuccessfully negotiated, with learners using other communicative strategies such as scaffolding to explain meaning. Surprisingly however, there were a number of higher frequency words that the learners weren’t able to replicate in discussions, such as ‘floor heating.’ Although learners weren’t always able to produce a desired vocabulary item during the meaning-focused discussion tasks, this may not entirely point to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge is thorny issue, and is one that is continuing to be discussed extensively (Nation, 2015). The main arguments are whether usage equates to knowledge or not, and how passive and active knowledge can be adequately measured and recorded. So although learners failed to produce a desired vocabulary item in English in the instance of interaction, further studies would need to be carried to confirm accurate tests of knowledge in this context.

In response to the third research question, it is surprising to note the amount of NGSL 1 items that the learners felt the need to negotiate in the instance of interaction. However, participants were collectively more successful at providing L2 equivalents to these items than any other frequency list. It is also interesting to note the lack of NAWL items that the learners requested support with, given that discussions may typically have more of an academic focus than other forms of oral interaction. Finally, the high proportion of Off-list words may be influenced by the topic area of the discussions, for example words like *refrigerator*, *microwave*, *oven*, *birthrate*, and *geothermal* are arguably intrinsic to the topic of technology.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to find out the nature of negotiated vocabulary items on the writer’s English discussion course. The data presented here may help instructors pre-empt problematic vocabulary items before teaching a class, in this case lesson six, and adjust materials accordingly. This study could also be used by textbook developers when considering future revisions of the learners’ textbook. Above all, this study has attempted to understand more about the controversial issue of vocabulary negotiation with the use of L1, by observing the frequency profile of the requested items and to what extent learners successfully produced these words. Follow-up studies will build on this preliminary study, but in a much more pedagogical direction.

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APPENDIX

Required L2 Vocabulary	L1 Item Used	Word Type	Produced?	Frequency Level
Age	年齢 (nenrei)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Alien	宇宙人 (uchūbito)	Noun	✗	NAWL
Already	既に (suden)	Adverb	✓	NGSL 1
Zone	区域 (kuiki)	Noun	✗	NGSL 3
Attitude	姿勢 (shisei)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Completion	竣工 (kanryō)	Noun	✓	OFF
Broom	ほうき (hōki)	Noun	✗	OFF
Calculator	電卓 (dentaku)	Noun	✗	NAWL
Charge	充電 (jūden)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1
Close friend	親友 (shin'yū)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1
Emerge	出てくる (detekuru)	Verb	✗	NGSL 2
Comfortable	快適 (kaiteki)	Adjective	✓	NGSL 2
Commute time	通学時間 (tōgaku jikan)	Noun	✗	OFF/NGSL 1
Complication	複雑 (fukuzatsu)	Noun	✗	NAWL
Confirm	確かめる (tashikameru)	Verb	✗	NGSL 2
Confusion	混乱 (konran)	Noun	✓	NGSL 3
Construction zone	建築域 (kenchiku-iki)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2/3
Crude	雑 (zatsu)	Adjective	✗	NAWL
Development (of)	開発 (kaihatsu)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1

Required L2 Vocabulary	L1 Item Used	Word Type	Produced?	Frequency Level
Development	発展 (hatten)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Gap	格差 (kakusa)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Earthquake	地震 (jishin)	Noun	✓	OFF
Earth's lifespan	地球の寿命 (chikyū no jumyō)	Noun	✓	NGSL 2/OFF
Emission	排出 (haishutsu)	Noun	✓	NAWL
Exist	存在 (sonzai)	Verb	✓	NGSL 1
Fan	扇風機 (sensūki)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Feel sad	落ち込む (ochikomu)	Verb	✗	NGSL 1/2
Floor heating	床暖房 (yukadanbō)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1/2
Flower pot	植木鉢 (uekibachi)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2/3
Food famine	食料飢饉 (shokuryō kikin)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1/OFF
Fuel	燃料 (nenryō)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Geothermal power	地熱 (chinetsu)	Noun	✗	OFF/NGSL 1
Global warming	地球温暖化 (chikyū ondan-ka)	Noun	✓	NGSL 2
Historical figure	歴史上の人物 (rekishijōnojinbutsu)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2/1
Increase	増える (fueru)	Verb	✓	NGSL 1
Injury	怪我 (kega)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Life costs	寿命費 (jumyō-hi)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1
Limit	限定 (gentei)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1

New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

Required L2 Vocabulary	L1 Item Used	Word Type	Produced?	Frequency Level
Low birthrate and longevity	少子高齢化 (shōshi kōrei-ka)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1/ OFF / OFF
Maintain	養う (yashinau)	Verb	✗	NGSL 1
Microwave oven	電子レンジ (denjirenji)	Noun	✓	OFF
Mischief	いたずら (itazura)	Noun	✗	OFF
Modern day	現代 (gendai)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Nuclear power plant	原発 (genpatsu)	Noun	✓	NGSL 2/1/1
One-child policy	一人子政策 (hitorikko seisaku)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1
Pension	年金 (nenkin)	Noun	✓	NGSL 3
Population	人口 (jinkō)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Prevention	予防 (yobō)	Noun	✗	OFF
Radio clock	電波時計 (denpadokei)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2/1
Range	範囲 (han'i)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Real intention	本音 (hon'ne)	Noun	✗	NGSL 1/2
Refrigerator	冷蔵庫 (reizōko)	Noun	✗	OFF
Relationship	関係 (kankei)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Relief	起伏 (kifuku)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Shortage	不足 (fusoku)	Noun	✓	OFF
Softener	柔軟剤 (jyūnanzai)	Noun	✗	OFF
Spread	広がる (hirogaru)	Verb	✓	NGSL 2

Required L2 Vocabulary	L1 Item Used	Word Type	Produced?	Frequency Level
Stairs	階段 (kaidan)	Noun	✓	NGSL 3
Surgery	外科 (geka)	Noun	✗	NGSL 3
Bully	いじめ (ijime)	Verb	✗	OFF
The Past	過去 (kako)	Noun	✓	NGSL 1
Trace	痕跡 (konseki)	Noun	✗	NGSL 3
Transportation	交通手段 (kōtsū shudan)	Noun	✗	NGSL 3
Uncomfortable	落ち着かない (ochitsukanai)	Adjective	✗	OFF
Wind power	風力 (fūryoku)	Noun	✓	NGSL 2/1
Artist	作家 (sakka)	Noun	✗	NGSL 2
Total Recording Time:			4 hours 26 minutes (266 minutes)	